

The Political Dichotomy of School Leadership: Policy, Practice, Social Justice - Evidence from Sixteen Countries

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Abstract

Globally, schools continue to face ongoing reductions in budgetary allocations, increase in student numbers, performativity pressures and high stakes accountability. Like it or not, schools/ school leaders are operating in rapidly changing national educational policy contexts that are demanding more from less and a much greater contribution to national economic development – leaving some commentators and school leaders alike to suggest that schools are being reoriented towards national economic development and less towards social transformation, a fundamental aim of education as set out in the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This widening dichotomy is the site for several tensions occasioned by the approach to educational policymaking, and the policy apparatus of national governments, played out in schools, where school leaders are caught between implementing government policy, delivering an education to students that equips them to reap the espoused benefits of education, and keeping staff engaged and motivated.

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principles? How do school leaders lead in contexts where the good of the national 'community' appears to supersede the good of local communities and individuals? This paper examines the

dichotomy of school leadership, brought about and sustained by national political actions which, although professing to 'futures' orientated, appears in conflict with quality school leadership and outcomes consistent with social justice.

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Introduction

Educational policies are crucial to the shaping and orderly functioning of a national education system. They underpin, and, therefore, influence every aspect of schooling and have very important functions. For example, they “provide standardisation, uniformity and confidence to stakeholders”; they serve as “actual parameters or as shaping the parameters for actions and behaviours of individuals and groups within a system” and they “exist for creating order within an education system as well as in individual schools” (Miller 2018a, p.39). Accordingly, educational policies “establish frameworks and constraints in areas such as staffing, curriculum, safeguarding and protecting students and the welfare of staff” (Miller, 2018a, p.39). Nevertheless, educational policies do not exist in a vacuum, as they are interwoven into the fabric of a national society, and they are sometimes famed to reflect the ideological and other viewpoints of a certain segment of society (whether the middle to upper class and/or governments and political parties).

On the face of it, educational policies exist to “guide and shape the work of school leaders and what goes on in schools” and to “provide school leaders an essential framework through which to exercise and emancipate their leadership” (Miller, 2018a, pp. 39-40).

Nevertheless, school leaders, globally, are increasingly regarding educational policies as problematic, “not only because their implementation sometimes competes for limited resources in the implementation of other policies, but also because the content of policies can be vague and conflictual” (Miller, 2018a, pp. 39-40). Acknowledging this tension, former UK Schools Minister Ed Miliband (2003) argued “There is nothing more infuriating for professionals in the field than the feeling that the latest set of ministerial priorities will soon be superseded by a new set” (np). This position is also supported by Lumby and Coleman (2017) who argued, “The policy context changes not only what is done in schools, teaching and learning, but also the relationships between staff and children, between staff, and between staff and parents. The pressures of performativity, that is, constant scrutiny by means of league tables or inspection, accompanied by fear of potential public exposure, are particularly corrosive” (p.20). These tensions are problematic for those who work and study in schools, in particular school leaders, who, through education and schooling have a vital role to play in nation building and in the social and economic transformation of nation states.

An important point of departure from the past, however, is the steady “repositioning of a school’s work mostly around national economic imperatives”, which is a feature of “a broader market culture that has infiltrated the field of education” (Miller 2018a, p. 40), which, according to Grace (1989), “...puts market before community ... maximizes strategies for individual profit and advantage; conceptualizes the world in terms of consumers rather than citizens, and marginalizes issues to do with morality and ethics...” (p. 134). The actions of policy makers therefore highlight that “... policies cannot be divorced from interests, from conflict, from domination or from justice” (Ball 1990, p. 1).

Conceptual Framework

Educational Policies as Fuel and Road Map

Educational policies, according to Miller (2016), “are the fuel on which education/schooling is run, simultaneously establishing parameters and providing direction” (p. 142). As fuel, educational policies provide education systems and education institutions in those systems with the energy needed for their functioning and their sustenance. The dual role of educational policies is important since education systems cannot function without educational policies; and new and revised educational policies are needed to maintain an education system and to reflect and respond to the complexities of the environment within which educational institutions operate. Embedded in Miller’s observation is the fact educational policies also provide direction to actors and events within an education system. Yet, the top down nature of educational policies have led to tensions among school leaders who are responsible for their implementation.

Educational Policy as Environmental Hazards

Miller (2016) also noted that, “Educational policies give shape and structure to an education system and can lead to both coherence and mayhem for those who must enforce, deliver or otherwise experience them” (p. 142). This tension was also highlighted by Miliband (2003) who characterised the approach to educational policy-making in the UK “as either the motor of progress or its handbrake” (np). Highlighting a further tension, Olssen, Codd, and O’Neill (2004) noted, “There was a time when educational policy as policy was taken for granted ... Clearly that is no longer the case. Today, educational policies are the focus of considerable controversy and public contestation ... Educational policy-making has become highly

politicised" (pp. 2–3). This view is supported by Bell and Stevenson (2006) who point to "relatively fragmented approaches" to educational policy-making which "often fail to provide a cogent account of the policy process" and which makes it difficult "for those working in schools that are subject to educational policies to make sense of the policy contexts within which they have to operate" (p. 2). Accordingly, Shilling (1993) questioned "whether education systems have the capacity either to be fully controlled, or to accomplish planned social change with any degree of accuracy" (p. 108).

Literature Review

In his study of school leaders in England and the Caribbean, Miller (2016) noted, "The external policy environment of a school consists of two discrete but interrelated contexts: the supranational and the national" (p. 81), and it is important to establish that events in both these contexts are primary determinants of the scope, content and character of educational policies. Global level educational policy-making have been described by Schriewer (2000) as "a web of reciprocal references moving, reinforcing and dynamizing the worldwide universalisation of educational ideas, models, standards, and options of reform" (p. 334), and for "standardizing the flow of educational ideas internationally and changing fundamentally what education is and can be" (Carney 2009, p. 68).

Accordingly, and increasingly, whether in response to events in the supranational environment, or as a response to national events and a strategy aimed at securing certain benefits for a nation state, "[E]ducation is being positioned as a golden ticket to individual and national prosperity and a hedge against social displacement, since through education, students should be in a better position to assess

and develop their talents and to produce goods and services that are more highly valued and more useful to society” (Miller 2018a, p. 41) Accordingly, the buffer effect of education is “...embedded in a universalized web of ideas about development and social problems” (Verger, Novelli, & Altinyelken, 2012, p. 10), articulated by educational policies, not only framed in economic terms, but whose content and nature, underline the fact that “a country’s journey to national economic development starts at the gate of a school” (Miller 2018b, p. 13).

This situation, associated with, and is a feature of the market culture, has not only resulted in a shift in educational priorities, but has also created a situation where educational policy priorities are determined and developed by actors outside of education (Bell & Stevenson, 2006), although it is the duty of those working in education to deliver and achieve them (Gunter, 2012). Accordingly, Miller (2018a), argued that “As a process, policy-making and implementation in education have become fraught, arguably a victim of political interests and expediency” (p. 41). Miller concludes, “A further consequence of this [policy] shift is that schools and school leaders are finding themselves in cross fires between differing political interests and dictates as they try to deliver on their primary commitment to students and their secondary commitment to the national state” (Miller, 2018a, p. 41).

National Policy Environment

As discussed above, within a nation state, it is the responsibility of a government to establish the context within which education/schooling is provided to citizens, and therefore it is the responsibility of a government to establish educational policies and to determine their scope, nature and content. National educational policy environments will vary significantly depending on a range of factors, not least the economic, cultural, social, economic and political realities of a nation state. Put differently, "Despite the ambitions of nation states and governments, economic, political and social realities of a country can delay or defer the realisation of some policy intents" (Miller, 2018a, p. 44). Miller also described "on-the-spot, off-the-cuff policy pronouncements" (2018, p. 46) or "overnight policy delivery" (Miller, 2018a, p.44) as characteristic of national governments in both developed and developing countries, which often did not reflect the "on the ground realities" (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011, p. 629) of schooling. Nevertheless, in as much as school leaders are under pressure to deliver national educational policy objectives, they are not "merely passive receivers and implementers of policy decisions made elsewhere" (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 2).

From his study of school leaders in England the Caribbean, Miller (2016) reported that, in response to increased and "overnight" demands from policymakers, school leaders were exercising personal agency by filtering out and mediating national policy implementation, by focusing "on what their school is capable of doing, what would work in their school and how, and whether they had the human and material capacity and resources to deliver in ways that were practical and reasonable" (Miller, 2016, p. 86).

The Study

This cross-cultural study of school leadership in 16 countries was undertaken over a period of two years, 2014–2016. Data were collected using a mixed method approach, thus allowing for comparisons of different practices across, within and between different national and sub-national spaces. Given the fact school leadership may be viewed as a “functionally equivalent phenomena” (Miller, 2018c, p. 6), it was crucial to acknowledge ‘emics’ (things that are unique to a culture) and their role in shaping the practice of school leaders, and ‘etics’ (things that are universal to all cultures), since they both have an important role in enabling and improving understanding of the practice of school leadership in different national and sub-national cultures/ contexts.

Analytical Approach

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from participants. Correlational and regression analyses were conducted on the quantitative data to establish patterns of dependence and/or correlation. Qualitative data were the larger of the two data sets and these were analysed using narrative post-structuralism. In using this approach, attention was given to the discourse and narratives of school leaders in relation to social institutions (e.g., schools) and cultural products (e.g., a national education system). According to Foucault (1981), “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). Accordingly, discourse was acknowledged to be a useful tool for understanding the work of school leaders, since narratives constructed by actors are often subsumed into the actions that comprise their practice. Ethnographic methods and procedures (in particular, key informant interviewing) were also incorporated into



the analytical frame, in order to generate critical insights from school leaders in relation to their practice in their national, local and cultural settings. This allowed the researcher to access events, discourses and tactics in different school contexts and/or cultural spaces, which may not have been [adequately] captured by quantitative methods, and which as a result provided “a more direct style of thinking about relationships among knowledge, society and political action” where the “central premise is that one can be both scientific and critical, and that ethnographic descriptions offers a powerful means of critiquing culture and the role of research within it” (Thomas 1993, p. vii). Incorporating ethnographic methods within the analysis of data was therefore a methodological and a political act, for giving voice to school leaders, especially those located in smaller and developing countries, as well as for zeroing in on how school leaders manage shifting educational policy agendas in their different national and cultural spaces. The interview excerpts included in this paper are therefore to illustrate and enable our understanding and analysis of discourses and ‘events’ in these spaces.

Participants

Sixty-one school leaders from 16 countries were involved in this study. Each is currently a “principal” or “Head teacher” in their country’s national education system. All participants work in public schools or schools operated by their country’s national education ministry or education department. Twenty-four male and thirty-seven female took part in the study. Forty-six lead schools in urban and/or inner city areas and 15 lead schools in rural and/or remote areas. Thirty-six are primary school leaders and twenty-five are secondary school leaders.

Table 1.
Demographics of participants

Country	# of participants	School location		Gender		School type		Average years of service	
		Urban	Rural	M	F	Pri	Sec	Teacher	Leader
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Anguilla	2	2	-	-	2	2	-	25	10
Antigua	1	-	1	-	1	1	-	24.5	9.5
Brazil	2	1	1	-	2	1	1	19	9
Canada	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	31.5	15.5
Cyprus	7	6	1	5	2	2	5	22.8	8
Guyana	2	2	-	2	-	2	-	24.5	14.5
Israel	3	2	1	-	3	2	1	26	3
Jamaica	9	6	3	2	7	6	3	24.4	4.6
Montserrat	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	28	11
Mozambique	3	1	2	2	1	3	-	27.6	16
Pakistan	8	8	-	2	6	5	3	11.6	5.1
South Africa	6	2	4	3	3	2	4	21.5	6.6
St Maarten	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	20	6
Turkey	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	15	10
UK (England)	10	9	1	4	6	4	6	24.4	7.1
USA	3	3	-	1	2	2	1	24.3	7.6

Continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, North America

Participants were from all over the world representing a good mix of ethnic, linguistic, social, religious, political and economic characteristics. For example, participants were from five developed countries and 11 developing countries. 11 countries represented are members of the Commonwealth. English was not the official language (although spoken widely) of participants from nine countries. In the main, male school leaders had more teaching and leadership experience in years.

Findings

Educational policies exist for the smooth running and good order of an education system and the schools operating therein. Based on interviews with 61 school leaders located in 16 countries on five continents, there is evidence that the approach to, scope, content and character of educational policies, in the global and national environments, are having a significant influence on what goes on in schools as well as how school leaders approach and enact leadership in these countries. Four main themes, the necessity of education policies, hazardous educational policy environment, educational policy, agency and social justice, and the political environment a challenge to school leadership, are discussed in turn below. Findings are presented to reflect the country, participant number in a country, and gender. For example, "Israel, 3F" means: Country- Israel; participant 3; Female.

The Necessity of Educational Policies

Among the main aims of educational policies is the provision of direction and focus, and of helping to establish the character and the tone of an education system. School leaders in this study acknowledged the necessity of educational policies in setting out national expectations, in shaping institutional practices and targets and in demanding accountability. They said:

- *The school does not exist in a vacuum or in an empty space, it is affected and driven by many factors, and one of these factors is education policy (Israel, 3F)*
- *Without ... policies and procedures, a school can be like a rudderless ship... It is important to have clarity, which leads to consistency – allowing staff to do their jobs without ambiguity. (Canada, 1M).*

- *In order for schools to function in a structured manner, policies are extremely necessary. The absence of policies tend to cause chaos and misinterpretations of what procedures should be followed. (St Maarten, 1F)*

School leaders were very clear about the role of educational policies and how these set and shaped the context for their work. For example, they argued educational policies demanded (and led to) “better accountability from leaders” (Antigua, 2F); and helped “with strategic resource decisions” (Jamaica, 2F) in particular, regarding monitoring of performance and student progress. Although the approach to policy making in many of the countries in the study was top-down or heavily centralised (e.g.: Cyprus, England, Jamaica, Mozambique, Guyana, Montserrat, St Maarten, Antigua, Anguilla), and although school leaders very much resented this approach to policy-making, they nonetheless regarded educational policies as establishing accountability, maintaining consistency, developing and maintaining standards, reducing discretion, focusing and refocusing vision, and defining and clarifying purpose at both system and institutional levels. On the one hand, this highlights that school leaders are clear about the role and functions of educational policy in a national education system and in school leadership. On the other hand, they acknowledge (although they may not appreciate) that their practice is very much one that is influenced and contextualised by actors and by events in the national (Gunter 2012) and/or supranational (Miller, 2016) policy environments.

Hazardous Educational Policy Environment

Many challenges faced by school leaders are the result of a national educational policy environment that is in conflict with itself, due to multiple policies requiring simultaneous implementation, policy directives that compete with each other for [scarce] resources,

and/or policies that do not sufficiently address local or other context specific issues or circumstances. As a result, school leaders very much saw the policy environment as a potential hazard to their practice and to nation education systems as a whole.

- *The policy environment poses new challenges for school leaders ... we are sometimes unclear about the content and purpose of policies we are expected to deliver. (Turkey, 1M)*
- *[H]ead teachers must adhere to policy or face punishment. A school is policy driven because you are threatened to follow them. (Guyana, 1M)*

Bell and Stevenson (2006) argued that governments want policy implementation to be seen as done, to be reported as done and to be accounted for; described by Gunter (2012) as a “game ... where those outside of schools ... controlled the leadership of schools” (p. 18) and where “the interplay between the agency of the head teacher and the structures that enable and prevent that agency” (Gunter, 2005, p. 172) are almost always at a crossroads. Furthermore, from the evidence presented in this study, it thus appears that, globally, school leaders are caught in a “... game in which market-based economic imperatives have become central to both their professional success and leadership practice” (Addison, 2009, p. 335), and where they must learn a set of rules “couched in economic language and with frequent intervention, or interference, from those beyond education” (Eacott, 2011, p. 50).

- *Leaders must follow guidelines. These are tested and tried and are usually aimed at achieving national goals. However, these must be tweaked, and fitted to the organisation. (Jamaica, 1F)*
- *School leaders continually tread the balance between policy dictates and remaining true to their own and generally accepted educational philosophy. Change through policy is a daily reality in the current target led educational context, a pressing reality for leaders. (England, 9M)*

School leaders in this study described being driven instead of being led by policies - an important distinction characterised by ad-hoc policy-making, short-termist policies, and where those required to implement policy are often not provided with adequate time or resources to do so (effectively). Grace (1995) highlighted that such a reductionist approach emphasises quasi-scientific management solutions, which do not make space for the “on the ground realities” (Ball et al., 2011, p. 629) of schools or the uniqueness of a school’s context. Thus, Grace (1995) warns that the study of school leadership effectiveness should be placed within the “wider political, cultural, economic and ideological movements in society” (p. 5) in order to make sense of how school leaders “do” leadership. Furthermore, Eacott (2011) reasoned that current approaches to educational policy making is steadily leading to “the cultural re-engineering of school leadership and the embedding of performativity in the leaders’ soul” (p. 47).

Educational Policies as Politics and a Threat to School Leadership

The educational policy environment itself was considered by some school leaders as a hazard, which was having an impact on their autonomy and ability to do their jobs. School leaders in England, especially, highlighted how a change of government, and a change in education secretary had led to changes to policies and priorities- many of which they didn’t feel were in the best interest of schools.

- *Policy drives too much ... which wouldn’t matter if they didn’t constantly change and if they were grounded in moral values. Current policies around accountability measures and the curriculum are particularly challenging. (England, 7F)*
- *The policy environment of schools cannot be ignored. Currently in the English system, the push for increased standards with the threat of academisation has*

pushed many headteachers in a direction they may otherwise not have taken had it not been for the prevailing governmental policy. (England, 3M)

These tensions have been noted by Bell and Stevenson (2006) who pointed out that, “[T]he tools of policy are of course not value neutral, and the way in which particular policies are enacted in particular contexts is intensely political ... policies cannot be disconnected from the socio-political environment within which they are framed” (p. 44).

- *There is the negative or downside to policy where power and politics often determine the dominant voice (s) to be heard as well as how the policy should be enacted. This rhetoric, I often observe, is not based on adequate philosophical assessment or empirical data, hence, it frequently produces some undesired outcomes. (Montserrat, 1M)*

As discussed earlier, those who develop educational policies and those who must implement them do not always see eye to eye. Accordingly, Miliband (2003) proposed, the approach to educational policy-making in the UK and the relationship between policymakers and policy implementers may be described “as either the motor of progress or its handbrake” (np). The evidence from school leaders highlights several tensions in the relationship between policymakers (governments) and policy implementers (school leaders), tensions believed to be having a negative impact on the motivation, ambitions, vision and aims school leaders have for their schools. Bell and Stevenson (2006, p. 44) asked, “How does state policy manifest itself?” A response from Ball (1990) included, “Policies are the operational statements of values ... We need to ask whose values are validated and whose are not ... policies cannot be divorced from interests, from conflict, from domination or from justice” (p. 1). Furthermore, the evidence from school leaders suggests educational policies, at times, appear to be amoral, conflictual, top-down, fast paced and ad-hoc.

Educational Policy, Agency and Social Justice

Schools leaders are often constrained by educational policies, and left frustrated by policy-making that appeared amoral, conflictual, top-down, fast paced, short-termist and ad-hoc. By nature, educational policies are neutral to institutional contexts, and it was left to school leaders to navigate, mediate and otherwise manage the implementation of educational policies in ways that created as little disruption as possible to agendas and plans they had for their schools.

- *I am more independent in making decisions. I do not always rely on policies. (Cyprus, 7M)*
- *Objective decisions should be made, but the experience of school leaders and others on the ground should be included. (Cyprus, 6M)*
- *I have never been fond of working within the limits of policies. Rules are OK but not on their own. (Cyprus, 4M)*
- *We follow policies, but with our character. (Cyprus, 1M)*
- *It may be necessary to circumvent a policy to facilitate mitigating circumstances. (South Africa, 1M)*

School leaders in Europe, especially in Cyprus showed a greater degree of resistance to policies by mediating their implementation. That is, they decided against implementing policies they felt they were unable to deliver, or they only implemented aspects (parts) of certain policies. School leaders in developing countries were most likely to adopt a filtered approach to policy implementation. That is, they decided what was appropriate and manageable for their school, and when. School leaders in England showed the highest degree of frustration with educational policies. Nevertheless, this did not [always] translate into policy filtering and/or mediation. In the main, the actions of school leaders in the study mirror Giddens' (1984), observation that at one point or another, it will become necessary for people to assert their agency against both the rules (structures) and the

systems, an observation also made by Miller in his 2016 study in England and the Caribbean who found school leaders chose to focus “on what their school is capable of doing, what would work in their school and how, and whether they had the human and material capacity and resources to deliver in ways that were practical and reasonable” (p. 86).

The agency of school leaders in this study is manifest in Miller and Hutton’s (2019) revised theory of ‘Situating Leadership’, in which they argue that effective school leadership is ‘situated’ within an individual but emerges from how they engage with and manage, negotiate and navigate environmental factors. Environmental factors, they argue include legal/ regulatory factors, and institutional factors. Accordingly, leadership is a function of environmental and personal factors, or $L = f(Ef + Pf)$, where: L = leadership practice; EF = environmental (legal/regulatory factors + institutional factors) + Personal factors. School leaders approached policy implementation with their character as well as with their heads, and pushed back against wholesale policy implementation, an important exercise in personal agency. Miller and Hutton propose that whereas environmental factors, set parameters for the practice of leadership, it is personal factors that produce the effectiveness of leadership through how school leaders deconstruct, interpret and engage both legal/regulatory and institutional factors. Moreover, as suggested by Hutton, the quality of leadership is enhanced by the level and intensity with which personal factors engage and overcome environmental factors (Hutton, 2011).

Implications

Schools are at the core of ongoing changes initiated and led by events in the supranational and national educational policy environments. As a result, how school leaders experience and enact their leadership is being shaped and re-shaped, rather decisively, by events well beyond their schools and their control. Although not exclusively, national educational policies are heavily influenced by and can be overturned by events in the supranational environment. Similarly, school agendas are heavily influenced by and can be overturned by events in a national educational policy environment. This interlocking relationship, described by Schriewer (2000), as “a web of reciprocal references ...” (p. 334), shows a dynamic process of influencing, based on “an ever-evolving pattern of relationships ... between constituent parts” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 4). How can school leaders in these contexts demonstrate fidelity to mission? How can they articulate and exemplify social justice leadership? How can they maintain moral purpose in the face of a conflictual educational policy environment? These are but few of the questions national societies must ask themselves, as school leaders grapple with educational political environments that “... can be as volatile as they are unpredictable” (Miller, 2016, p. 81).

Educational policymaking is invariably a complex exercise, and current approaches to policymaking risks forcing individual school leaders towards policy filtering and policy mediation, responses and strategies which, on the face of it affirms the agency of school leaders, but which if not carefully managed, can lead to dwarfed outcomes for teachers and students, as well as resulting in problems for a national system. Accordingly, “privileging of policy-making over policy implementation risks alienating school leaders who have



responsibility for implementing educational policies” (Miller 2018, p. 56). Nevertheless, as educational policies are shaped and reshaped until the point of implementation (Bowe et al., 1992), national governments can reduce the perception of privileging policy making over implementation, by meaningfully drawing on the experience and field expertise of school leaders, in ways that support national policy agendas and ultimately schools.

Bell and Stevenson (2006) argued that those working in schools should be able make sense of their national policy context since policy agendas demand they are able to respond to and implement policy directives. School leaders, given their positions, have particular responsibility for doing this, since they are a buffer between a school’s internal environment and its external [policy] environment. Although school leaders make key decisions related to the interpretation and implementation of external policy agendas at school level, these are usually influenced by a “complex mix of factors including personal values, available resources and stakeholder power and perceptions” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 8). Thus, an ability to anticipate and understand events in a school’s external policy environment, and being able to understand the meaning, purpose and resource requirement of events is an important leadership quality. Yet, the ability of a school leader to anticipate and understand is always to be juxtaposed against the fact that, “education is an (impure) public good, in the economist’s sense, but that conclusion alone does not tell us whether or not markets, internal or free, are appropriate mechanisms for educational provision” (Tooley 1993, p. 121).

Conclusions

Educational policies guide, and to a large extent, shape the practice of school leadership. Schools, like other educational institutions do not exist in a vacuum, and nor can they function without policies developed by a national government. Educational policies are neutral to any singular school context. Yet, in order to increase the likelihood of buy-in from school leaders, and their ultimate success, developing educational policies should draw on the “on the ground realities” (Ball, et. Al., p.629) of those working in a range of educational contexts so that the policies developed are more inclusive and more reflective of the realities of all types of schools within a national education system. Educational policies must not undermine, or appear to undermine, the work of school leaders but rather align with and emancipate their work. The evidence from this study points to “theoretical and perspectival and ethical challenges” (Ball et al., 2011, p. 52) – which, may intensify the quality of leadership (Hutton, 2011), but which also risk undermining the effectiveness of leadership (Miller, 2016).

The national educational policy environment of a school is crucial for establishing order and coherence within a system, and educational policies are important guides for school in clarifying and working towards national imperatives. As policies are not value neutral or context neutral, they bring into sharp focus tensions among policy makers, school leaders, the objectives of policies and how these tensions [can] impact the practice of school leadership. Put differently, educational policies, the very instruments designed to bring coherence, structure and/or order to a national education system, is arguably the same instrument that can undermine the overall effectiveness of the system- first by being amoral, conflictual, top-

down, fast paced, short-termist and ad-hoc, and second, by undermining the work of school leaders, the very persons tasked with educational policy implementation. This is the political dichotomy of school leadership.

Although Habermas (1976) portrayed increasing state intervention as necessary to mitigate inherent contradictions in capitalist modes of thinking, the precise nature of such interventions is a matter for government, in whose gift is the power to deploy a range of policies and strategies in attempting to secure compliance and/or change (Simmons & Smyth, 2016). School leaders are united in their concern that current approach to educational policy making is seemingly reducing the practice of school leadership to “a purely instrumental, tactical, administrative exercise” (Plant, 1982, p. 348). It appears that current approaches to policy-making could lead to motivational crises among school leaders brought about by the educational policy environment that carry a severe risk of not only challenging but also undermining their leadership and thus their schools.

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